

Dalit Panthers Manifesto

(Bombay, 1973)

Revolutionary stand of the Panthers

Today we, the 'Dalit Panthers', complete one year of our existence. Because of its clear revolutionary position, the 'Panthers' is growing in strength despite the strong resistance faced by it from many sides. It is bound to grow because it has recognized the revolutionary nature and aspirations of the masses with whose smiles and tears it has been bound up since its inception. During last year, motivated attempts have been made, especially in the far corners of Maharashtra, to create misunderstandings about our members and our activities. Misconceptions about the objectives of the 'Panthers', about our commitment to total revolutionary and democratic struggles, and about its policies, are being spread. It has, therefore, become necessary clearly to put forward our position. Because, 'Panthers' no longer represent an emotional outburst of the dalits. Instead, its character has changed into that of a political organization. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar always taught his followers to base their calculations about their political strategy on deep study of the political situation confronting them. It is necessary and indispensable for us to keep this ideal before us. Otherwise we might mistake the back of tortoise for a rock, and may be drowned in no time.

The present Congress rule is essentially a continuation of the old Hindu feudalism which kept the Dalits deprived of power, wealth and status for thousands of years. Therefore, this Congress rule cannot bring about social change. Under pressure of the masses it passed many laws but it cannot implement them. Because the entire state machinery is dominated by the feudal interests, the same hands who, for thousands of years, under religious sanctions, controlled all the wealth and power, today own most of the agricultural land, industry, economic resources and all other instruments of power.

Therefore, in spite of independence and the democratic set-ups, the problems of the dalits remain unsolved. Untouchability has remained intact. It remains intact because the government did not do anything to eradicate it except passing some laws against it. To eradicate untouchability, all the land will have to be redistributed. Age-old customs and scriptures will have to be destroyed and new ideas inculcated. The village organization, the social organization, peoples' attitude – all these will have to be restructured to suit true democratic objectives. We must pay attention to the objective process of the power that imprisons the dalit and which has succeeded in making him tie his own hands.

The Hindu feudal rule can be a hundred times more ruthless today in oppressing the dalits than it was in the Muslim period or the British period.

Because this Hindu feudal rule has in its hands all the arteries of production, bureaucracy, judiciary, army and police forces, in the shape of feudal, landlords, capitalists and religious leaders who stand behind and enable these instruments to thrive. Hence the problem of untouchability of the dalits is no more one of mere mental slavery.

Untouchability is the most violent form of exploitation on the surface of the earth, which survives the ever-changing forms of the power structure. Today it is necessary to seek its soil, its root causes. If we understand them, we can definitely strike at the heart of this exploitation. The oppression of dalits still exists despite the lives and work of our two great leaders – Jotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. It is not only alive, it is stronger. Hence, unless we understand and give shape to the revolutionary content latent in the downtrodden lives of the untouchables, not a single individual seeking a social revolution would be able to remain alive in India.

Truly speaking, the problem of dalits, or scheduled castes and tribes, has become a broad problem, the dalit is no longer merely an untouchable outside the village walls and the scriptures. He is untouchable, and he is a dalit, but he is also a worker, a landless labourer, a proletarian. And unless we strengthen this growing revolutionary unity of the many with all our efforts, our existence has no future. The dalit must accordingly accept the sections of masses, the other revolutionary forces as part of his own movement. Only then will he be able to fight his enemies effectively. If this does not take place, we shall be condemned to a condition worse than slavery. We must develop and help this consciousness ripen every year, every month, day, hour and every moment. Then alone shall we possess the right to be called human beings at all.

It was for this that Dr. Ambedkar made us realize our humanity even in our state of beast-like exploitation. We should, to be successful, accept and understand a thing only after deep study, with a calm mind. We should not fall prey to slogans and outbursts. We must uproot the varna system, the caste system that enslaves us in its snares. The soil in which it survives and grows must be made infertile. We must understand that the caste nature of the term dalit is breaking down.

What has the government done for the dalits?

When India obtained Independence in 1947, the face of the administrative class changed. In the place of the king's prime minister came the 'people's representative'. In the place of the Vedas, Upnishads, Manusmriti and Gita, came the Constitution. On a blank page, independence, equality, brotherhood proliferated. From 1947 to 1974 is a long period of time. In these 27 years the Congress government, turning the freedom struggle into its own capital, has been ruling with a monopoly. Four five-year plans, five general elections and three wars have gone by in this post-independence 'coming of age'. But the problems

and needs of the dalits, of the entire population, have been kept in a sort of deep freeze by the government.

Beyond preserving state power in its hands, the government has done nothing else. On the contrary, by raising slogans of people's rule, of socialism, 'garibi hatao' (eliminate poverty), and green revolution, it has crushed the dalits, the landless, poor peasants and the working class under its feet. Gambling with their lives, tempting a handful amongst them, the government tried persistently to endanger their very existence. Using divisive tactics that split people along religious, caste and other lines, they endangered the very integrity of democracy.

In a democracy where men cannot exercise self-respect, well-being and an importance to their lives, where men cannot develop his individuality and his society, where those who with their blood wet every grain of the country's soil have to starve, where men have to forgo the land under their feet, the roof over their heads, where the upright have to break down and fall, where men have to see their mothers and sisters raped, in such a democracy, independence cannot be called true independence.

The struggle for independence was a struggle under the leadership of national capitalists, landlords, feudal, for their own benefit. It was not under the leadership of the people, or of the Dalits. And Dr. Ambedkar had always said that it should be of the latter. That man called Gandhi in whose hands the leadership of the struggle rested, was deceitful, cunning, an orthodox casteist and one who gave shelter to those who wanted to preserve class rule. Merely to preserve the unity of the Independence struggle, he flirted with problems of the Dalits, of untouchability, of the people. And that is why Babasaheb (Ambedkar) called him, time and again, the enemy of the people, the villain of the nation. Babasaheb used to say, Gandhism means preservation of religious authority, Gandhism means traditionalism, Gandhism means casteism, Gandhism means preservation of traditional divisions of labour, Gandhism means incarnationism, Gandhism means the holy cow, Gandhism means worship of images, Gandhism means an unscientific outlook.

The British gave up their rule because of the seamen's mutiny, the emergence of the Azad Hind army, because of the struggles of the peasants, workers and dalits. Because of these they could no longer remain in power. Giving independence to Gandhi and Gandhians meant that the British wanted their own interests in the country to be looked after. This was the sort of borrowed independence we got. True independence is one that is snatched forcibly out of the hands of the enemy. One that is like bits thrown to a helpless beggar is no independence. In every house and every mind the flame of true independence has to be ignited. This did not happen. That is why the Dalit, the worker, the landless and the poor peasant did not become free; the muck at the bottom of the pond remained where it was and, in fact, the government that retained the status quo kept on telling bigger and bigger lies to the Dalits.

What have other parties done for the dalits?

The left parties, having fought five elections, have grown bankrupt. They are now interested in moving from election to election. In 1967, the Left parties united against the Congress. There was such opportunism in the united front that parties like the communists joined hands with communalist parties such as Jan Sangh and Muslim League. In some states, Left united fronts came to power. But the absence of a clear cut programme made the anti-Congress stand useless. In the task of putting some alternative before the people, of solving the problems of the dalits, of establishing the rule of the poor in the country, all the Left parties proved powerless. As a result, revolutionary people's groups lost faith in electoral democracy. Uprisings like Naxalbari took place and the spark spread around the country.

With the 1972 elections, things came back to square one. The Congress sat like a beast on the heads of the dalits, of the people; famine struck, the very livelihoods of crores of people were uprooted, animals perished. Factories were shut down, workers faced unemployment, everyone was harassed by the mounting price rise.

The full eclipse that Congress rule represents for the life of the country has not yet terminated. But our Left parties, playing the politics of parliamentary seats, are still wasting time trying to get recognition from the Congress. Not one dares to turn revolutionary to take up the problems of the people. All those Left parties who do not possess political power have ignored questions of a social revolution. They have not combine he class struggle with the struggle against untouchability, have not raised a voice against cultural and social domination along with economic exploitation.

Untouchability is nothing but an extremely poisonous sort of exploitation. This exploitative system was given birth to by Hindu feudalism and thrives for its benefit. The framework of untouchability is simply widening with the help of the army, the prisons, the legal system and the bureaucracy. Under the name of high-flown philosophy and liberation of the soul (*moksha, nirvana*), dalits have been deprived of earthly happiness, and have been looted of all they possess.

With the industrial revolution, machines came into being. Dalits were harnessed to the machines. But in the minds of the upper castes, feudalism survived. Because the owners of the machines could make a profit only by keeping the social structure intact. Only if a social revolution grips the minds of the dalits, will there be a political revolution. If this takes place, the upper caste, the upper class, will lose the power it possesses. The stand that is take by the Left parties prevents the spread of revolutionary ideology amongst the people. Because struggles really and truly meaningful to the dalits were not conducted, dalits have grown poorer. They have had to face innumerable atrocities.

The Republican Party and Dalit Panthers

The problems of the dalits today, be they social, political or ethical, cannot be solved within the framework of religion and caste. This is what Dr. Babasaheb realized after his defeat in the 1952 general elections. A scientific outlook, class consciousness and a completely atheistic approach and fighting for humanism alone could add an edge to the struggles of the dalits. For this purpose, Dr. Ambedkar wanted to transfer the then-existing Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) into a broad-based party. This could not happen during his life time. After his death, his 'followers' simply renamed SCF as the Republican Party started to pursue casteist politics. They never united all the dalits and all the oppressed. Above all, they conducted the politics of a revolutionary community like the dalits in a legalistic manner. The party got enmeshed in the web of votes, demands, select places for a handful of the dalits and concessions. So the dalit population scattered over the country, in many villages, remained politically where they were. The leadership of the party went into the hands of the middle class in the community. Intrigue, selfishness and division became rife.

Destroying the revolutionary voice of Dr. Ambedkar, these contemptible leaders made capital out of his name and set up their beggars' bowls. This is Dr. Ambedkar's party, they said. This is Dr. Ambedkar's flag, they said, and filled their coffers. And thus, except the *satyagraha* of the landless conducted under the Dadasaheb Gaekwad's leadership, the party did not take up any programme worth its name. the atrocities against dalits grew endemic. In a period of one and a half years, 1,117 dalits were murdered. The land grew barren, not a drop of water was available. Honour was violated, houses gutted, people killed. Along with the very question of living, physical indignities grew sharper. What did the Republican Party do? The party got caught in the net cast by a cunning ruling-class leader like Yashwantrao Chavan. Its life perished. Unity vanished, impotents filled the party. If we put our future in the hands of such impotent leaders, we will forgo our very lives, and that is why today we have to announce with deep pain that we are no blood relatives of the Republican Party.

The Dalits of the world and Panthers

Due to the hideous plot of American imperialism, the Third Dalit World, that is, oppressed nations, and dalit people are suffering. Even in America, a handful of reactionary whites are exploiting blacks. To meet the force of reaction and remove this exploitation, the Black Panther movement grew. From the Black Panthers, Black Power emerged. The fire of the struggles has thrown out sparks into the country. We claim a close relationship with this struggle. We have before our eyes the examples of Vietnam, Cambodia, Africa and the like.

Who is a dalit?

Members of scheduled castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.

Who are our friends?

- 1) Revolutionary parties set to break down the caste system and class rule. Left parties that are left in a true sense.
- 2) All other sections of society that are suffering due to the economic and political oppression.

Who are our enemies?

- 1) Power, wealth, price.
- 2) Landlords, capitalists, money-lenders and their lackeys.
- 3) Those parties who indulge in religious or casteist politics, and the government which depends on them.

Burning questions before dalits today

- 1) Food, clothing, shelter
- 2) Employment, land, untouchability
- 3) Social and physical injustice

The struggle for the emancipation of the dalits needs a complete revolution. Partial change is impossible. We do not want it either. We want a complete and total revolutionary change. Even if we want to move out of the present state of social degradation alone, we will have to exercise our power in economic, political, cultural fields as well. We will not be satisfied easily now. We do not want a little place in the brahmin alley. We want to rule the whole country. We are not looking at persons but at a system. Change of heart, liberal education, etc. will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle of this giant mass will come the tidal wave of revolutions. Legalistic appeals, requests, demands for concessions, elections, satyagraha – out of these, society will never change. Our ideas of social revolution and rebellion will be too strong for such paper-made vehicles of protest. They will sprout in the soil flower in the mind and then will come forward with full force with the help of steel-strong means.

Dalit Panther is not a mere slogan

The way we look at our questions is the first step to solving them. Panthers will paralyzingly attack untouchability, casteism and economic exploitation. This social system and state have taken may a cruel path to convert us into slaves. Turned us long back into 'shudras'. In the present modern forms of slavery there are mental chains of slavishness. We will try to break them. In our struggle we will become free.

Our Programmes:

- 1) More than 80 per cent of India's population lives in the villages. Of those, landless peasants are 35 per cent, and 33 per cent of all landless agricultural labourers belong to scheduled castes. (Those Dalit poor peasants who do own pieces of land, own a negligible amount). The question of landlessness of the dalit peasants must be resolved.
- 2) Landless peasants must immediately get excess land through the application of the Land Ceiling Act. Waste and jungle land must likewise be distributed.
- 3) Feudal survivals are still to be found in the villages. Due to this, dalits are cruelly oppressed and exploited. Landlords and rich peasants get social prestige along with wealth. Due to this, the atrocities on dalits have grown endemic. This system has clamped itself on the dalit's chest, affecting every part of his life, from day to day living to the deeper economic questions. This system must be destroyed.
- 4) The wages of landless labourers must be increased.
- 5) Dalits must be allowed to draw water from public wells.
- 6) Dalits must live, not outside the village in a separate settlement, but in the village itself.
- 7) All means of production must belong to the dalits.
- 8) Exploitation by private capital must cease.
- 9) Social, cultural and economic exploitation must be removed and socialism must be built in India. Misleading nationalization must give away to a true introduction of socialism.
- 10) All dalits must be assured of daily wages.

- 11) Unemployed dalits must be given unemployment benefits.
- 12) All dalits must be given free education, medical facilities, housing and good quality cheap grains.
- 13) When giving employment in educational institutions, the requirements to declare one's caste and religion must be immediately removed.
- 14) The government must stop giving grants to religious institutions immediately and the wealth of religious places must be used for the benefit of dalits.
- 15) Religious and casteist literature must be banned.
- 16) The division in the army along caste lines must be ended.
- 17) Black marketeers, hoarders, money-lenders and all those exploiting the people economically must be destroyed.
- 18) The prices of essential commodities must be refunded.

We will build the organization of workers, dalits, landless, poor peasants through all city factories, in all villages. We will hit back against all injustice perpetrated on Dalits. We will well and truly destroy the caste and varna system that thrives on the people's misery, which exploits the people, and liberate the dalits. The present legal system and state have turned all our dreams to dust. To eradicate all the injustice against the dalits, they must themselves become rulers. This is the people's democracy. Sympathizers and members of the Dalit Panthers be ready for the final struggle of the dalits.